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AMERICA: A LITERARY NOTION

by

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History is of course what you make of it. When I was at the university, the popular historians held that the story of America was properly told in the terms of compromise and conciliation. Our native genius, they presumed, was to settle an issue and then move forward to the next one, making progress, as it were, by means of a democratic dialectic. At that time we believed that the major contentions in American history -- if one could get past the almost overwhelming exceptions of the Civil War and the expropriation of the Indians -- had been conciliated by a bargaining between economic, regional, and social interests. The new lot of historians does not accept this. They tell the American story in the terms of interdiction and confrontation. They hold that we have as a nation settled little, that the great national issues have less often been resolved than postponed, and that a reckoning lies ahead. It is obvious that many Americans, the young particularly, are not assured by their country's history. We look to the past not to find there what we gained, but what we lost. Perhaps this is not so singular; perhaps it is universal. Every man is a traveler from another time, and if the journey is long, he ends as a stranger. Myself, I begin to recall America now, and seek out its monuments and ruins. I recognize the past, but I have to imagine the present.

History ought to be written as fairly as possible, we can agree, if for no other reason than the good ends of art and scholarship. I hesitate to go further. One hears often the aphorism of George Santayana that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." It is a pretty statement but one that is quite untrue, I think. The danger is not that we shall fall into error by neglecting history; instead, the danger is that we shall use history to excuse a continuing error. This we know cruelly from the accounts of the Indochina war.

No good comes of getting the past wrong on purpose. One ought to be careful not to turn recollections into political proofs. I once thought that liberals are less reliable than conservatives in this respect -- probably because they are more tolerant of Marxists, who cannot abide the untidiness of history and keep rewriting it in support of their theory. But now I am not so sure. It seems to me that conservative politicians waste our attention, and embarrass themselves, by calling upon the public to cherish the presumably benign society of their childhood years. President Nixon mistakes his audience in this way. His recounting of his own past has the effect of making his sophisticated listeners intolerant, and his tolerant listeners uneasy. Yet what he recounts is to be believed, surely. It

really was like that: his family's plain Quaker teaching, his father's diligent but failed effort at storekeeping, his admiration for team sports in school, his maturing respect for the correctness of the written law. I am familiar with that kind of personal history, as are millions of others. But is there any point in Mr. Nixon's telling it? He will not persuade the poor by telling them of his simple beginnings: the poor are notorious for admiring the rich, in this century the Roosevelts and the Kennedys. Nor will he persuade the powerful, for we all know that when times are tough, Wall Street and State Street abandon rugged individualism in favor of public spending.

Why does Mr. Nixon persist, then, in trying to reclaim that old, gone, lost America of his childhood years? Maybe he does it because he, like so many of us, cannot be freed from thinking about the essentially literary notion of the American Dream, or the American Promise. Something, something -- the dream unrealized, perhaps, the promise unfulfilled -- makes us restive about the past and uncertain of the future. In America both the liberals and the conservatives feel cheated -- but not by each other. Political complicity is not our style, and we do not credit it much; for that reason, in part, the extreme right and the extreme left have no standing here. Neither the fascists nor the communists have been able to convince us with their favorite argument, which is that the people need to be

guarded against conspiracies. Such a theory of history is not acceptable to American liberals or conservatives. If each feels cheated, it is for different reasons.

Liberals often strike me as people who are always surprised. They are surprised that things turn out badly for the most part, and that the generality of men is not more reliable than the particular man. They are quick to romanticize the personality of one leader, and just as quick to repugn and savage another. Liberals are dismayed, and rightly, that we have made too little of the opportunity we found on this vast and open continent. Conservatives, on the other hand, tend to mistake the notion of self-prejudice for that of self-interest, which is to say they wrongly expect that a man's opinion of himself is in the main determined by his pay and property. The conservative finds it hard to accept the fact that most people act politically from holding a common attitude, rather than from holding a common interest. And, like the liberal, he is dismayed by the current state of affairs. Both of them are inclined to think that the citizenry used to behave better even if it lived worse.

The fact is that most people did behave better, if by that we mean that they were more compliant to public convention and more restrained in the ordinary presence of civil authority. No sensible purpose is gained by denying this, however one may

explain it. I grew up in a downtown district where the streets were fairly clean: the inhabitants were poor but not careless, and the city's sweepers were underpaid but not scornful. I went to public schools in which discipline was more prized than was expressiveness, and the result in the students was a reliable but rather deadened demeanor. The people in my neighborhood knew that the police were often unfair but always powerful, and they feared to be accused of crime or even intransigence. Mainly, however, they regarded crime as being both humiliating and unproductive, and no way to success. I think it is true to say, without entering into sociological analysis, that the dominant mode in American life at that time was generality as distinguished from particularity, with more regard for publicity than for privacy. The government was thought to serve the Constitutional purpose to "insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare." Liberty was, as a concept, more communal than individual, more of a tent than an umbrella.

All that has changed, so immediately changed that what we do now cannot be comprehended in the traditional terms of political liberalism and conservatism. The turbulence of living in the United States today is described by Milovan Djilas, the Yugoslav dissenter, as "the madness of liberty." If it is not madness, then it is a terrible riskiness. What we seem to be doing is testing to the furthest limit the public safety against

an individual's safety, and, in the effort, risking both. It might be allowed that such a chance can be taken by a new nation, or by one that has lost a war or suffered a revolution, but not by the oldest republic on earth. Nothing confirms more the radicalism of these times in the United States than the spread of anti-Americanism around the world. Leftists and rightists both fear the unknown course, and the unknown consequence, of our political fundamentalism.

The new American radicalism has not yet been contained within the bounds of party politics. All we can say of it, perhaps, is that it attempts a number of things. As citizens we seek to secure for every person his civil rights without breaching his privacy. This is a complicated procedure when put into practice, and it leads to some absurdity in daily affairs, such as school "busing," which makes commuters out of children before their time. As citizens we seek also to tolerate and to safeguard various acts of civil disobedience without at the same time allowing civil disorder. On the whole, this can be said to work: certainly the antiwar demonstrations had the effect of changing a disastrous foreign policy. And as citizens we seek, in a manner and to a degree that has never before been tried, to protect the individual against official or bureaucratic harassment. The results here are mixed. As robbery and vice become harder to patrol and to prosecute, they become more

usual and maybe more profitable. (In New York City, the chance of one's being sent to prison for a felonious act is now about one in two hundred.) Supporting people by welfare has freed millions of the lower classes from the fright of poverty, but it is corrupting, too. Crime and cheating on the dole are a kind of carelessness. All classes in our society are less inhibited than they were a generation ago. The new American radicalism, unlike the Marxist movements, has no trace of puritanism in it.

What we attempt in the United States, and the quality of the risk we run, can be described by a number of grand declarations, each of which seems to carry its own contradiction or irony. We are the only great power that is trying to educate its entire population. (Jean-François Revel notes that in France there are fewer college students among fifty million Frenchmen than among twenty-two million American blacks; and that the United Nations does not give statistics on the French library system because it is so meager.) Educating the whole citizenry is a staggering concept, especially in a nation in which schooling is controlled and financed locally. Yet, as we undertake the final stage toward its fulfillment, we are about to defeat its means, which is the public school system. The irony is that as we set about achieving a universal education we lose confidence in the methods of mass education, which now embrace, among other

things, unionized teachers, a graded curriculum that allows no-fail and no-fault instruction, and open-enrollment universities.

We alone, among nations, are addressing ourselves to the issue of racism on a massive scale. The American blacks are unique: they form a huge minority -- larger than two-thirds of the populations represented in the United Nations -- that has no separate national or linguistic or religious identification. The American blacks are simply not like other minorities in other countries. They are not like Koreans in Japan, or Jews in the Soviet Union, or Pakistani in Britain. They are themselves only, and they are us. The American must deal inescapably with the question of racism -- inescapably in the way that the Chinese would have to deal with it if there were eighty-five million whites, a minority of eleven per cent, in China today. Yet the American dilemma is not to be seen as an accident of history, for it was in part caused by a contradiction of the nation's political genius and idealism. We are the inheritors of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and so believe that "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." The terrible irony is that, whereas all those Americans who were first settlers and, later, immigrants did choose to come to this land and did consent to their governance, the black and the Indian

neither made the choice nor gave their consent, for the black was enslaved and the Indian was disenfranchised. The American black and the American Indian have not yet entered into a social contract with the American state. Until they do, until they can, they will remain alienated and aggrieved.

We are the only people in modern history who have popularly and effectively declared themselves against a major war that is being fought by its own soldiers, and fought successfully, by the usual definition of military success. How wondrous this is: from such a circumstance, in another place, one would expect nothing less drastic than a revolt or civil war. What did happen was the growth of a unique radical movement, comprised mainly of students, that was able to force from office a national administration and to alter the country's conduct of foreign affairs. There is no good looking through a lexicon of Marxist politics to find the source of the radicalism in the antiwar movement. It will not be found there. The movement coalesced because its members held a common attitude toward a common-sense matter of life and death. It was pragmatical, and in that respect not unlike the labor movement of the nineteen-thirties, or the coming together of populist farmers years ago. The radical youth movement was not, in any event, based on fixed intellectual positions, and it has all but disappeared at present for the practical reason that it won

its issue. Quite unlike the Europeans, we have managed to credit intellectual people with influence without making of them a political party or a social class.

But there is, in all this, an irony. It would seem that in the United States, if you win, you lose. Popular movements cannot persist, apparently, if the attraction of organizing and taking action is greater than the attraction of a political theory. A popular movement tends to lose its center -- and spin off its adherents -- once it gains its first objectives. In America, the lack of dogma is, in effect, liberating: it frees a man of somebody else's enthusiasm, or impatience.

Those are some of the grand declarations, then, that I think are determining the course of the present time: declarations of good intent, and their ironies, or mocking mirrors. That things are changing we can all see. Do they change for the better, or for the worse? I am inclined to be optimistic, but I forget on what account. Optimism is a native trait: Americans are given to reminiscing about the future. They do it at shareholder meetings, at political conventions, and at university commencements. This I can do also, on occasion, but I confess that I find it harder and harder to do well. The years go by, and man begins to recognize the past.

No good comes of getting the past wrong, or of investing it with a false sentiment. The America I recall was in large

part a hard and lonely land. I saw an Edward Hopper painting the other day, of a gaunt Victorian house with staring window eyes. As a boy I saw a house like that once in southwestern Nebraska, a house fiercely alone beside a railroad track. When I look at a Walker Evans photograph, I recall walking by storefronts like the ones he depicts, storefronts as blank as stage sets, down along the Gulf Coast near Galveston. I reread F. Scott Fitzgerald and catch sight again of the most typical scene, the college boys changing trains at Chicago, on their way east to look for the lost enchantment. I watch Winterset on the Late Show and once more I hear the newsboys on Arapahoe Street in Denver, calling out that Sacco and Vanzetti are dead. I recognize all that, and my heart aches for America. But there's nothing for it, because that America is gone, gone forever, and what remains is its art and its exiles.

Somewhere, in the present and in the legendary future, somewhere there is another America. I do commend you: seek it, mark it, live it.